

How to Make Commencement Worth While



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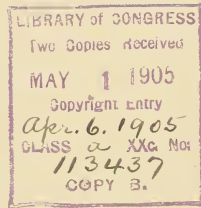
A treatise setting forth in detail the essentials which
should be at the command of every teacher who
would close the year's work with a successful com-
mencement :: :: ::

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To my father, John P. Burchit, who for more than forty years has given his whole energy to the teaching profession, and whose unswerving fidelity to principle has been an inspiration to thousands of young minds, this little work is affectionately inscribed.

FOREWORD



IF you are principal of a high school, or the one in authority in any school or college, and have once endured the throes of anxiety and annoyance incident to commencement day, you will welcome assistance from any source.

This treatise is designed to give practical help for that particular occasion, by one whose training in elocution and oratory has been supplemented by fifteen years' teaching of those subjects, in both high school and college, as well as in private, and who has prepared many students for public appearance. Such experience could not but result in a comprehension of the obstacles to a successful commencement exercise, and in a knowledge of means for removing the same.

As before stated, this little work is not intended as a text-book on elocution, but as a

special aid for a special need. The majority of your graduates have never before appeared in public, and probably never will do so again. To leave them without instruction would be cruel; to cumber them at the last moment, with a mass of technicalities would be confusing and futile. What they wish, what you wish for them, is to make a creditable showing for a brief hour.

To that end, you will find here listed, in a plain and simple way, the difficulties which it is believed you will surely meet, together with the means of surmounting them which have been proved effectual by

THE AUTHOR.

INTRODUCTION



THE commencement exercise, as presented in the greater number of high schools and smaller colleges, is the most inadequate and unjust test to which a graduate could be subjected. He is thrust before the public with an original essay or oration, having had but slight experience in composition, and, in the majority of cases, absolutely no instruction in bearing or delivery.

As most persons gain their sole knowledge of the school work in their community by attendance upon the annual exercises, they are prone to believe that the young man or young woman who makes the best impression on that occasion has been all along the strongest pupil. That this is often untrue, a peep into the principal's grade-book will prove. Any teacher will testify that not infrequently the brilliant

student is diffident in the presence of others, while the superficial one may possess the self-confidence which will assure him a creditable appearance in public.

It is but common justice, then, to give the graduating class thorough and pointed instruction, that they may approach their commencement day with agreeable anticipation instead of with feelings of torture and self depreciation, as is so often the case.

PREPARATION FOR REHEARSAL



LET us presume that the thesis has survived the instructor's pruning-knife of criticism. Three things are still necessary before actual rehearsal can begin.

FIRST:—The pupil should strive to be satisfied with his production. It is well, while engaged in writing, to be stimulated by a desire to improve; but once the thing is done, and he feels it represents the best that is in him, he should cease from worry, and turn his mind to the work yet to come. It is obvious that he cannot hope to impress an audience with the merit of a composition of which he himself is ashamed.

SECOND:—You, as his teacher, should analyze the subject matter with the student, (in private) to bring out emphasis, inflection and rhetorical pause. Take up paragraph

after paragraph, elucidating every shade of meaning, and balancing phrase against phrase. Assure yourself that he has a clear idea of how each sentence^e should sound. In the work of memorizing he will unconsciously follow this lead; whereas, if left to himself, he may fall into vocal ruts from which it is next to impossible to extricate him.

THIRD:—The graduate must have his lines perfectly committed to memory, that the interruptions necessary in rehearsal, or any unexpected occurrence during the final delivery, may not disconcert him.

These three things once accomplished, he is ready for a private hearing.

FIRST REHEARSAL



O one should be present but yourself and the pupil. Let him simply stand before you and recite his discourse from beginning to end, without interruption. By this you will be able to judge how far he has profited by your previous instruction.

Then take up the first paragraph and go over it in detail, correcting inflection, emphasis and enunciation. By enunciation is meant the power of projecting the voice; it does not refer to mere loudness. It may be investigated under two heads; clear-cut articulation and tone-projection. In public delivery, articulation must be somewhat magnified. That which is sufficient in conversation is entirely inadequate in oratory. An eminent teacher used to say to his classes;—"Articulate so distinctly that it sounds ridiculous to your-

selves; all sharpness will be blunted by passing the distance between you and the audience."

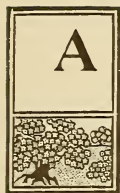
In tone-projection, remember that the voice follows the eye, when the eye sees with intelligent purpose. The speaker should regard the audience as a collection of individuals, and direct his eye to each one. Then the voice follows, being thrown as a light missile, every listener receiving it in full force. There is no need of shouting or shrieking. Pure tone, clean-cut articulation and direct manner will reach the farthest point of any room.

It will pay to spend considerable time on the introductory portion of the oration, as it is extremely important to make a good first impression. One who fails to do this may triumph at the last, but it requires a tremendous effort to bandage up a crippled beginning.

Follow the above thorough treatment throughout the entire discourse, taking care to bind the paragraphs together. This is to guard against lapse of memory, which is apt to occur where a new line of thought is introduced.

When the student has finished, call his attention to defects and mannerisms, such as slovenly attitude, twitching of hands, shifting of feet, clearing the throat, or any peculiarity of manner which would call the attention of observers to his physical person. This matter must be tactfully managed, in order not to offend or discourage the pupil. Always make your criticisms in such a way as to leave him ambitious to improve, never sore and hurt.

SECOND REHEARSAL



AT the second stage of instruction, the subject of Posture should be introduced. This is the name given to the general position of the body, and the manner in which the weight is borne upon the feet. Some practical knowledge of this matter is absolutely essential to the forcible expression of thought.

Posture has three general divisions, which may overlap or run into each other, the mixed attitude partaking of the meaning of the two of which it is composed. The three positions most used in oratory are:

1st—The PASSIVE; weight borne directly under the body by one or both feet. This is the attitude of repose and dignity, and accompanies simple statement of facts, common conversation, all unimpassioned sentiment.

2nd—The OBJECTIVE; weight on advanced foot. This is the attitude of offense. It accompanies earnestness, enthusiasm, desire to move others. The intensity of the thought determines whether the advanced knee shall be bent.

3rd—The SUBJECTIVE; weight on retired foot. The attitude of defense. It indicates, when used in different degrees, mental concentration, introspection, arrogance, antagonism, defiance. The intensity of the thought determines whether the retired knee shall be bent.

The pupil should usually assume a slightly Objective posture at the beginning of his oration, changing to others as his subject matter demands. Let the shifting be done without noise or apparent intention. Never permit stamping, striding, or any violent action, as this brings the speaker into line for

ridicule. Should he prove awkward and conscious, he must practice until his movements seem the natural accompaniments of his thought, (as in truth they should be) and are accomplished without any special effort.

As at all rehearsals, mention mannerisms and faults of any sort yet uncorrected. Give due praise for whatever improvement you observe.

THIRD REHEARSAL



AT this stage of progress, it is well to decide whether or not to introduce Gesture in the delivery of the address. This depends upon the individuality of the student as well as upon the nature of his discourse. Many orations are forcibly given without gestures, depending for effectiveness upon voice, posture and facial expression.

If gestures be used, they must be few, must seem unstudied and spontaneous, and must appear at points where the thought is at culmination. Every gesture consists of:—

The Preparation, or raising the hand from a state of rest.

The Gesture Proper, emphasizing the sentiment expressed.

The Recovery, or return of the hand to the relaxed condition.

Let the student remember that the gesture proper, or principal impulse of the hand and arm, must be so timed as to occur on the **accented syllable** of the word which it is intended to strengthen. Failure to do this will entirely defeat the purpose of the action. The preparation and recovery must be so unobtrusively accomplished, and so blended with the actual gesture as to attract no attention.

There are three general positions of the hand, viz., Supine, Prone, Vertical.

The Hand Supine (palm upward) denotes affirmation, definition, entreaty, persuasion, and all pleasing and elevating sentiments.

The Hand Prone (palm downward) indicates prohibition, denial, reference to death or destruction, the low, the vile, all that is debasing.

The Hand Vertical (palm outward, fingers

pointing upward) indicates surprise, repulsion, evasion, mental or physical aversion. The average graduation address will require this class of gesture but seldom.

Do not introduce gestures at the beginning of an address. The arms should then hang relaxed at the sides. Let hand movements come later, when stronger sentiments require additional means of expression. Avoid extreme or dramatic action, and meaningless flourishes. While studying Gesture do not relax vigilance regarding points made at previous hearings. Express appreciation of the pupil's efforts.

FOURTH REHEARSAL



AT this point, the student should be ready to learn the proper mode of advancing towards the audience and of retiring to his place. Let him rise, and with figure easily erect, and arms relaxed, walk simply and naturally to the center of the stage and well to the front. He should be so far forward that his voice will be projected towards the audience instead of being swallowed up in the side entrances to the platform or stage. He should be so far back that the footlights (which should always be provided) will shine upon his face without casting shadows upon his upper features.

Allow neither strutting nor slouching, neither haste nor hesitation. Never permit a bow of any sort, either at the opening or closing of an address. Used at the beginning, it appears as a sort of a bid for admira-

tion; at the close, it has the effect of an invitation for applause. In any event, it calls the eyes of those present to the **speaker's person**, which is always to be avoided.

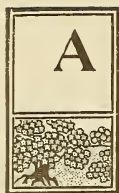
As his position is gained, let him include the audience, collectively and individually in a comprehensive glance, pausing for an instant until complete attention is gained. Then swaying the weight slightly forward, as suggested in the chapter on Posture, let him begin speaking.

Upon closing, he should take one step backward with the foot which is opposite to the direction in which he intends to move. That is, if his seat is toward the right, he should step back with his left foot, and vice versa. This gives the body an inclination forward, sufficient to indicate that he has finished. He can then turn easily and walk to his place. This must be practiced until it

can be done without halt or hurry.

At this rehearsal, which will probably be the last private one, mention once more all peculiarities of manner, and do not fail to commend the pupil on his progress.

CLASS REHEARSAL



AFTER each member of the class has been drilled according to the foregoing directions, it is desirable that he should rehearse as often as seems necessary before his class-mates, in order to accustom himself to the presence of an audience. This is a severe test, as most persons find it more embarrassing to address their familiars than to face a large assembly.

It is possible that on these occasions the more diffident ones may be inclined to slight your former instructions regarding gesture, facial expression and directness of speech; if so, insist upon having these things observed exactly as if the real audience were present.

Perfect order and courteous attention must be required of the listeners, and all suggestions and criticisms from them must be offered in a kindly spirit. Nothing so confuses and dis-

courages one thus rehearsing as to be compelled to witness meaning side-glances, nudges, or ostentatious note-taking. The writer desires to emphasize this point, inasmuch as the pupil is now at a stage where encouragement will urge him forward to success, while ridicule or even indifference will tend to reduce him to mediocrity, if not absolute failure.

When able to do so, arrange to have a few of these last practice hours in the hall where the final exercises are to be held. Place pupils in different parts of the room to report on the carrying qualities of each speaker's voice. If the class be large, divide it into sections of convenient size, that the sessions may not be too long.

CLASS TALKS



At convenient times during the weeks of preparation, give the class the benefit of a few short talks, to promote interest and harmony.

If, after the questions of emblem, motto and decorations have been settled, there still remains evidence of apathy on the part of any students, show them that, so far, the finishing of school is the most important event in their lives, and is so regarded by their families and the community at large. Appeal to their class pride, and make it clear that by their lack of enthusiasm they can mar the occasion for the entire class, and cause bitter disappointment to their friends.

At another time, speak of any faults or peculiarities of delivery which the class may hold in common. Many pupils acquire man-

nerisms from grade teachers which cling to them through life. It is a fact that whole classes often unconsciously imitate some trick of manner which they observe in their instructors, to the exclusion of the excellent qualities which they might better emulate.

Again, tell the class how to keep in good physical condition until Commencement is past. Warn them about taking cold. Emphasize the importance of regular habits, such as early hours, plenty of sleep and exercise. Ask them not to arrange many parties or class receptions, as these consume much time which should be devoted to rest. Too much society has compelled many a student to remain at home, ill, on Commencement day.

Any topic which concerns the class as a

body may be made the subject of such a talk;
if tactfully managed, much benefit will result.

FINAL REHEARSAL



THE final rehearsal should be held in the hall, after all decorations are in place, on the evening before the public exercises. This is necessary in order that each member of the class may know his place, and may be able to leave his seat and take it again unobtrusively. It is desirable, also, that all may become familiar with the glare of the foot-lights, with the location of different articles of furniture upon the stage; in fact, with every detail of the surroundings.

Do not imagine this of trivial importance. Attention to little things will make or mar your entertainment. The least occurrence, if unexpected, may cause a failure. I have seen a young man, at the height of his peroration, overturn a stand of flowers with a sweep of his arm. He had not observed it so near

him. I have seen a young woman, on her way to the front, trip over a rug and fall to her hands and knees. Imagine her confusion! Such incidents spoil the occasion, not only for the one most concerned, but for the whole class and audience as well.

Require all participants to be present at an appointed hour.

Begin promptly, and work through the entire program in proper order, musical numbers as well as literary.

Do not give any special drill or criticism. If mistakes are made, it is now too late to rectify them. An attempt to do so will result in confusion and discouragement.

This evening's work is apt to be far from satisfactory, owing to the nervous strain sustained by all. Do not be disheartened. You will be surprised to see how many of the

“kinks” will straighten out of themselves
over-night.

Get through early and go home.

COMMENCEMENT DAY



IT should be impressed upon the class in one of the short talks mentioned above, that Commencement day should be restful.

Positively no rehearsals, class meetings or school duties of any kind should be permitted. Discourage practice even at home on that day. If the pupil fears he may forget his lines, he may silently read his manuscript, carefully **looking** at each word to strengthen visual memory. This should be done early in the day. Let him then cease worry, and forget all about it, if he can. If he has been faithful in preparation, there is no cause for uneasiness.

He should rise at the usual hour, take moderate exercise, and eat plain food, avoiding sweets and pastries. The evening meal

should be partaken of rather earlier than customary. Instead of the starvation plan advocated by some, I advise a wholesome, nourishing meal, though not a hearty one. An empty stomach may cause giddiness, faintness, loss of memory, any one of which is fatal to a successful public appearance.

Warn the student not to be constantly doctoring his throat. Slight hoarseness may appear, but this is usually caused by nervousness, and is not susceptible of direct treatment. The throat should be ignored unless there is some really serious trouble, requiring medical attention. Throat tablets, lemon-drops, etc., produce an undue flow of saliva, which is apt to prove troublesome.

Preparations for the evening should be begun early and made leisurely, as it is not

desirable to arrive at the hall two minutes before the opening number, with red face and exhausted breath.

THE CLOSING EXERCISES



YOU should arrive early at the appointed place, to satisfy yourself that adequate arrangements have been made for the accomodation of the large gathering which is invariably present at a school entertainment. Be sure that the house is well ventilated, but without direct drafts. Examine the decorations to see that there is no danger of fire. Assure yourself that every thing possible has been done for the comfort of the people, thus insuring quiet and attention.

The class should be assembled and in readiness at least fifteen minutes before the hour to begin the program. This will allow grace for the tardy one. Do not permit loud talking in the dressing room, as it is plainly audible to the audience.

You should be calm and cheerful, outwardly at least; nervousness is contagious. The graduates will be affected by your manner. Be careful not to allow any pupil to see that you fear for his individual success, no matter what you may feel. Take it as a matter of course, and say, that all will acquit themselves with credit. Make them know that you expect much of them.

Begin the program on time, and keep it moving steadily, though without haste, to the end. Do not exhibit, nor allow the class to exhibit chagrin or impatience should a speaker blunder in any way. This will but call attention to a mistake that otherwise might go unobserved. Let him recover his ground, if he is able; if not, help him in the manner that seems best fitted to his misfortune, and let it pass.

It has been the writer's experience that it is better to do away with all prompting. When the speaker knows aid is near, he may unconsciously lean upon it; on the other hand, if he realizes that it is a case of "survive or perish" alone, he will compel his memory to serve him. However, if prompting be employed, let the words be spoken distinctly, so that they will be plainly heard by the pupil. It is very annoying to be obliged to ask for a repetition. The pupil should be previously instructed not to turn toward the prompter nor to show any discomfiture. Should the speaker flounder hopelessly, it is sometimes best to let him take his seat, allowing him another trial later in the program.

In presenting the diplomas, let your

speech be audible to both class and audience,
witty if possible, **short always.**

STUMBLING BLOCKS

THE DISCOURAGED STUDENT



It is almost certain that your class will contain at least one member who constantly depreciates his own efforts. "I can't" is his cry, at least whenever he thinks of "saying a piece" in public. Each blunder he makes at rehearsal, each suggestion you see fit to offer, only strengthens his belief that he is nobody, and can do nothing.

This young person may be uncommonly sensitive by nature, or he may be the object of unfair criticism at home, or he may even be a bit of a coward, fearing to brave the possible ridicule of classmates and public. In any case, he must be lifted out of his miserable position.

If he will not yield to the influences of ordinary encouragement and praise, you will

have to give him a straight, confidential talk, of the heart-to-heart variety. Point out that although he is as well off as others in the matter of natural gifts, he is retarding their development and will eventually destroy them by this cheapening process. While not causing him to hold too high an opinion of himself, strive to give him a due appreciation of his own ability, that he may not appear before his audience with an air of "please-pardon - me-for - occupying - time-and-space," and after uttering a few apologetic sentences, hurriedly retire to a back seat.

Belief in himself and in the truth of the message he is to deliver is his only salvation. When you have convinced him that **you** believe in him, you have gone far toward solving the problem.

STUMBLING BLOCKS

THE CONCEITED STUDENT



HIS person is the very opposite of the one just considered. He is handicapped by a sense of fancied superiority, and unless he can be cured of his fault, his audience will be hard upon him.

His self-assurance invites his listeners to expect much. If he fails to meet their expectations, their criticisms are very uncharitable. Instead of enlisting their sympathetic attention and desire for his success, he indicates by his lordly manner that he feels perfectly able to take care of himself, and that they may consider it a privilege to hear his eloquent words of wisdom. As a consequence, any blunder he may commit is apt to be received with secret satisfaction, even by a well-bred audience.

Should the conceited student happen to be a woman, her malady will probably take the outward form of affectation. She will assume a mincing gait; she will give herself an air of ultra refinement and culture; her gestures will consist of fearful and wonderful curves. Truly, she is standing in a slippery place. Should any mischance of delivery befall her, (as is indeed likely, her mind being occupied with herself,) all sympathy from her hearers would be withheld.

In rehearsal, suppress all outward signs of this inward feeling, such as swagger and bluff in the boy, unnatural graces in the girl, and undue movements of the head in both. If they do not understand what you wish to correct, you must tell them plainly, in private. In a tactful manner disclose the injustice they do themselves, and emphasize

the fact that there is **nothing** so hard for an audience to excuse as arrogance and affectation.

STUMBLING BLOCKS

THE EMBARRASSED STUDENT



THE case of the graduate who becomes embarrassed before his audience is a most painful one. He may be letter-perfect, every detail of his delivery may be all that is desirable at rehearsal, yet his public effort may prove a total failure.

When his name is pronounced, and he rises to face that awful amphitheatre, his courage deserts him, and he suffers real torture. His voice issues weak and trembling from a throat all choked and dry; his face flushes or turns ghastly pale; hands and feet become cold and clammy. His condition is evinced by every word and motion. The audience suffers with him, and is relieved when his harrowing ordeal is at an end.

Stage fright is no respecter of persons. It may seize the very pupil whom you suppose entirely safe from it; hence each member of the class should receive some advice on the subject. Traced back to its actual character, embarrassment is found to be a form of egotism. The student is thinking of himself and of how others regard him. The current of self-consciousness becomes so strong that it clogs the channels of expression. Could the speaker banish all thoughts of his physical self, his trouble would disappear.

To overcome this condition, familiarity with environment is a decided help. Also, in every rehearsal the student should school himself to address an imaginary audience, that the real one may have less power to disconcert him.

Again, he should see to it that every

detail of his dress is familiar and easy. So trifling a matter as a pair of squeaking shoes or a tight collar has been known to turn a speaker's thoughts upon himself to his utter undoing. The young woman whose gown is too long, or whose hair is dressed in an unwonted matter, is also a likely victim of the self-consciousness which will cause her to break down.

The greatest safe-guard for the orator, however, is a firm belief in the truth of what he has to say, and an intense desire to move his hearers to the same opinion. Let him strive to hold out his message, and to hide himself behind it. Let the mental serve as a screen for the physical. If he will do this, it will not occur to him to think of his deficiencies. Though his voice be uncultured, his

movements awkward, his appearance uncouth,
the audience will be deaf and blind to all but
the beauty of his sentiment and the strength
of his purpose.

THE FINAL WORD



IT may seem to you that the system of coaching which is promulgated in the foregoing pages will tend to produce a uniformity of delivery in the graduates, so that they will appear to have been run through a machine, each precisely like the others. Such a result would be deplorable, indeed.

It is true that many elocution teachers and drill-masters have a way of causing their pupils to imitate them, parrot-like. Never a reason or a general rule do they give. Their instruction consists, in a nut-shell, of saying:—“Behold me! Do as I do!” This is the most effectual method of crushing one’s individuality and producing flat failure that has yet been devised. Instead of impressing himself upon the pupil, the teacher should bring out the strong characteristics of the one taught, and develop his latent powers.

There need be no similarity among the members of your graduating class in the matter of delivery. The same forces, working outward through their separate personalities, will present different phases. If they will practice each of your suggestions until it becomes a part of their own mental or physical habit, they will not appear automatic or artificial.

Give a good reason for every word of instruction you offer. Not a rule of true eloquence but has its origin in the very fountainhead of human emotion. The pupil will see that what you require of him is not to be true to **you**, but to be true to **himself**. He will feel that what you wish of him is not dead art, but living Nature, which is, after all the only art. When I say—"Appeal to the student to be natural," do not understand me to refer to his acquired or second nature, but

to his higher, or God-nature, the bit of divinity that is his portion. This constitutes his real being of which it is impossible to rob him. When you prune off his mannerisms, you deprive him only of the excrescences of habit, not of any of those manners and ways which are the manifestations of original character. It is your part, as daily and intimate friend of your pupil, to study his personality and to adjust the suggestions here offered to fit his needs.

When Commencement day has come and gone, do not be disappointed if you receive scant credit for its success. I do not wish to be cynical, but I have often observed that if a pupil fails, his friends declare him to be the victim of inferior instruction; while if he scores a triumph, they attribute it to his remarkable intellect and personal energy. Verily, in most cases, teaching is forced to be its own reward.

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